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ABSTRACT

A group of 590 female M.D.'s, Ph.D.'s, lawyers, and artists between ages 30 and 40 completed a mailed questionnaire including an anxiety scale (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory), a sex role questionnaire (Personal Attributes Questionnaire), a measure of ego development (Inventory of Psychosocial Development), and an Attitudes Toward Women Scale along with a demographic information sheet. The major finding was that "generativity", the style of ego maturity associated with adulthood according to Erikson (1950), can be achieved by those who are not biologically "generative" or procreative. This result calls into question Erikson's emphasis on parenthood as a necessary condition for continued development, and offers counterevidence for the stereotype that childless individuals are immature and psychologically unhealthy. (Author)

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Voluntary Childlesssness in Professional Women [1]

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Voluntary Childlessness

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Introduction

Many women deciding whether or not to have children face a dilemma between need for occupational satisfaction and the desire to be a parent. Women in professional careers face this conflict in a special way: female reproductive potential demands that one begin childbearing by age 40, but it is during this time that a professional woman faces heightened career demands if she wishes to be considered for advancement. It is understandable that decisions about career vs. family priorities may be experienced with some degree of conflict, and perhaps more than for a woman employed in a tedious, low paying, low prestige job.

The importance of the conflict paradigm was suggested by Flapan (1969), who found that family planning decisions involve conflict, no matter how minimal, and by Blake (1973), who emphasized that social factors can be strongly influential in reducing this type of decisional dissonance. She stated that "it is by no means 'given' that individuals would volunteer for the regimen of parenthood unless they were subjected to powerful controls" (p. 22), but this supposition has not been tested. More generally, conflict models have not been applied explicitly in family planning studies, and this is surprising because they seem to capture the essence of ambivalence about parenthood delineated by Rainwater

(1960, 1965) and Pohlman (1969). A review of existing literature in this area suggests the conflict model's usefulness for investigating the general question: "What psychological characteristics are associated with a professional woman's decision to have no children?"

Though these attributes of voluntarily childless individuals may not be intuitively obvious, the stereotype of childless people is well known to most of us. LeMasters (1970) and Pohlman (1970) have observed that the characteristics attributed to childless individuals generally include such undesirable qualities as "unhappy, selfish, lonely, immature, and emotionally unstable". Veevers (1972) labeled these negative traits as a stigma implying "abnormality, unnaturalness, immaturity, sexual inadequacy, marital unhappiness and marital instability", besides arousing "moral indignation" among observers. Similarly, Williamson (1966) showed that childless individuals "tend to be perceived as not quite mature and as lacking in full adult status", probably because "competency in bearing and raising children" is widely considered a necessary developmental task (Duvall, 1962).

The present study tests this assumption, based on Erikson's (1950) formulation of the seventh psychosocial crisis, that of generativity vs. stagnation:

> Generativity, then, is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation, although there are individuals, who through misfortune or because of special and genuine gifts in other directions, do not apply this drive to their own offspring. And indeed, the concept of generativity is meant to include such more popular synonyms as <u>productivity</u> and <u>creativity</u>, which, however, cannot replace it. (p. 267)

However, he added that "the mere fact of having or wanting children ... does not 'achieve' generativity" (1950, p. 259), and this leads one to question whether childless individuals do not successfully resolve the seventh psychosocial crisis since productivity and creativity among non-parents cannot replace generativity. Does this mean, then, that only a subset of parents can achieve generativity? To clarify the incidence of generativity in parents and non-parents, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 5 investigate differences in occupational productivity and ego development among professional women - those with "special or genuine gifts in other directions".

Block (1973) extrapolated sex role concepts from Loevinger's Milestones of Ego Development (1966) and suggested that during the last three stages, there are attempts to deal with conflicting masculine and feminine aspects of the self. At the highest level of ego development, she hypothesized an integration of these masculine and feminine aspects of the self into an "androgynous" sex role definition. This has not been tested and Hypothesis 6 explores the relationship

between ego development and psychological androgyny.

The relationship of the sex role orientation variable to family size is one of the most complex. Clarkson et al. (1970) found that women who rate themselves highly on the 'masculine' competence cluster of items on the Sex-Role Stereotype Questionnaire have smaller families than women who rate themselves lower on these. More recent work by the same group (Broverman et al., 1975), however, reported that 35 to 54 year old women who score high on both the competency cluster and the 'feminine' warmth-expressiveness cluster have more children than low scorers on either or both. Smallest family size was found among women scoring high on competence and low on warmth-expressiveness. This suggest the usefulness of considering orientation to both masculine and feminine sex role items, and Spence et al. (1974) developed a categorization of high and low masculinity-femininity scores based on the four possible combinations (high masculine-high feminine, high masculine-low feminine, etc.). This type of comprehensive sex role categorization has not been related to family size, so Hypothesis 3 tests the relationship between this variable and the specific case of voluntary childlessness.

Erikson's (1950) theory implies that anxiety is a by-product of unresolved conflict between competing desires,

and resistance to anxiety is associated with successful conflict resolution. The relationship between level of anxiety and the seemingly conflict-laden choice of family size is explored in Hypothesis 4's measure of indecision. Finally, Hypothesis 7 studies the validity of Erikson's assumption by testing the relationship between anxiety and ego development.

Method

Measures

Sex role orientation was measured by the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence, Helmreich & Stapp, 1974), which contains a number of unipolar dimensions rated on a Likert-type scale to produce separate scores for masculinity and femininity, and these scales can be split at the median to produce four interaction types:

1 - low masculinity-low femininity
2 - low masculinity-high femininity
3 - high masculinity-low femininity
4 - high masculinity-high femininity ("androgynous")

Level of ego development was measured by the Inventory of Psychosocial Development (IPD) (Constantinople, 1969), which includes 60 items reflecting successful and unsuccessful resolutions for each of Erikson's first six stages of ego development. A seventh scale has been added to evaluate resolution of the conflict between generativity and stagnation. As with the original six scales, items consist of single words or short phrases, and the subject is asked to circle a number from 7 to 1 to describe how characteristic or uncharacteristic the phrase is of her. The five items on each of the seven positive and seven negative scales are summed to obtain crisis resolution scores (high score on positive scales and low score on negative scales

is taken to indicate successful resolution.) In addition, positive and negative items at each level are subtracted to obtain a difference score indicative of psychosocial maturity (Waterman, 1972).

Anxiety was measured by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) (Spielberger, Gorsuch & Lushene, 1970), a scale comprised of separate self-report forms for measuring state anxiety (A-State) and trait anxiety (A-Trait). The STAI A-Trait scale consists of 20 statements about general feelings and these are rated on a scale of 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Very much so). The A-State scale's format is similar, but subjects received exploratory instructions (How you feel when you think of whether or not to have children). Because the instructions were interpreted very differently by many subjects, the scale is not used for analysis.

Attitudes toward women were measured by the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) (Spence, Helmreich & Stapp, 1972), a Likert-type scale containing statements about the rights and roles of women in specific vocational, educational and intellectual activities. The original form consists of 55 items with four response alternatives scored from 0 to 3 on a continuum of "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly". The most traditional response is represented by 0, whereas 3 represents the most contemporary,pro-feminist response.

Occupational productivity was measured by the Information Sheet, listing publications, professional involvements, and achievements. Number of publications and number of achievements were scored from 0 to 5, according to the numbers reported by subjects. When the subject replied "several", this was given a score of 3, and when the subject replied "many" or gave a number over 5, these were given a score of 5.

Subjects and Procedure

To control for general socioeconomic status and educational level as possible decision determinants, subjects were M.D.s, Ph.D.s, lawyers, and artists between ages 30 and 40 listed in Who's Who of American Women, 1975-1976. Subjects included married, remarried, divorced, separated or widowed professionals, both with and without children. 1190 potential subjects were sent a recruitment letter and stamped reply postcard. 408 did not reply (34%) including 67 returned letters (5.6%); 72 declined to participate (6%), and 711 agreed (56.6%). All who received the initial request also received an information letter and those who agreed to participate received the cover letter and questionnaire along with a stamped return envelope. Five hundred and ninety questionnaire were returned and analyzed (49.5%), representing 82% of those who agreed to participate.

All of those who agreed to participate received a briefing of results. The 590 subjects present the following distribution when categorized by occupation and family size:

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

Hypothesis 1

Subjects with children will score higher on the success of generativity crisis resolution as measured by the Inventory of Psychosocial Development than will subjects who have decided to have no children.

A two-tailed t-test was performed for the mean scores of all subjects with children who were decided about family size and of all subjects with no children who were decided about family size, as well as a similar t-test for subjects within each occupational group. No significant differences were found between groups, with p-values ranging from .564 to .920.

To further test this hypothesis, a similar analysis was performed for the mean scores of all subjects with children regardless of family size decision and all subjects with no children regardless of family size decision. Again, results did not confirm the hypothesis for the total sample and for all additional groups. P-values ranged from .239 to 1.000. This finding clearly contrasts Erikson's theoretical formulation concerning ego development and biological procreation.

Hypothesis 2

Significantly more subjects with high levels of

ego development on the IPD will choose to have no children than will subjects at lower levels of ego development.

Subjects' scores on the IPD were split at the median of the score distribution (113), and subjects were categorized by number of children and decisiveness about family size for chi-square analysis (p=.4802). The hypothesis was not confirmed for any group individually and p-values ranged from .345 to .897.

To explore the idea that subjects who have decided to have no children will have a higher level of total ego development, one-way analyses of variance were computed for each group's total IPD scores, and two contrasts were performed for the total sample and for each occupational group. None of these analyses were significant, with p-values for ANOVAs ranging from .130 to .883; for contrasts with pooled variance estimates, from .070 to .930; and for contrasts with separate variance estimates, from .082 to .901.

Hypothesis 3

Significantly more subjects who have no children will be categorized as androgynous (type 4) on the PAQ than will subjects with children or undecided about family size.

Subjects' scores on both the masculine and feminine scales of the PAQ were split at the medians (M=25, F=9) and combined according to the four categories outlined by Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1974). Subjects were also classified by number of children and decisiveness about family size, as for Hypothesis 2. Chi-squares were obtained for the total sample as well as for each occupational group and the hypothesis was not supported for any group. P-values ranged from .110 to .619.

Hypothesis 4

Subjects undecided about family size will have significantly higher scores for anxiety on STAI2 than subjects who have resolved this issue by deciding to have children or to have no children.

As for previous hypotheses, subjects were classified by number of children and family size decisiveness. One-way analyses of variance were computed for mean STAI2 scores, and two contrasts were performed for the total sample and for each occupational group. ANOVAs for the total sample and for lawyers confirmed the Hypothesis (Total p=.013; lawyers' p=.036), but this difference was not significant for M.D.s (p=.582) and Ph.D.s (p=.158). For artists, the trend was reversed, with significantly

higher anxiety scores found for those who had decided to have no children (p=.023). This finding suggests the need for studies to explore the relationship between artistic "creativity" and biological "creativity". P-values for contrasts with pooled variance estimates ranged from .009 to .992 and for contrasts with separate variance estimates, from .026 to .993.

Hypothesis 5

Subjects undecided about family size will be less occupationally "productive" in terms of fewer publications and achievements than subjects who have decided either to have children or to have no children.

As previously, subjects were classified by number of children and family size decisiveness. To test this hypothesis, the number of publications was added to the number of achievements and one-way analyses of variance were computed for the total sample as well as for each occupational group, and two contrasts were performed for each ANOVA. Results confirmed the hypothesis for the total sample (p=.007) but not for the individual occupational groups in which p-values ranged from .202 to .557. Similar analyses were performed for number of publications separately, and for number of achievements separetely.

Results for number of publications also support the hypothesis for the total sample only (p=.019) and p-values for each occupational group ranged from .149 to .771. Similar results were found for number of achievements, though the p-value for the total sample was .051. P-values for the separate occupational groups ranged from .227 to .799.

Hypothesis 6

Significantly more subjects at high levels of ego development on the IPD will be androgynous (type 4) on the PAQ than will subjects at lower levels of ego development.

As described previously, subjects were classified by total IPD scores after the distribution was split at the median. Also, subjects were classified to one of four PAQ categories depending on the combination of scores on the masculine and feminine scales. Chi-square analyses were performed for the total sample as well as for each occupational group and results strongly supported the hypothesis in each case ($p < .000$ for each). This confirms Block's (1973) idea that sex role orientation parallels ego development.

Insert Table 2 about here

Hypothesis 7

There will be a negative relationship between ego development on the IPD, and anxiety on the STAI2.

Spearman correlations were computed for the total IPD and total STAI2 scores. Table 3 presents the coefficients for the three previously defined groups based on number of children and family size decisiveness. The hypothesis was strongly supported for the total sample and for each occupational group, confirming Erikson's (1950) theory of conflict, anxiety and ego growth.

Insert Table 3 about here

A number of exploratory multiple regressions were performed and it was found that

1. Total children wanted was negatively related to occupational "productivity" ($p=.017$) and positively related to size of total living group while growing up ($p=.019$). A marginal relationship emerged with occupational satisfaction ($p=.053$).

2. Number of children was negatively related to liberal attitudes toward women and their roles ($p=.0004$).

3. General ego development was positively related to occupational "productivity" ($p=.00004$), ordinal position ($p=.00005$) and occupational satisfaction ($p=.0000$), and negatively with anxiety ($p < .000$).

4. Ego development at the stage of generativity was also positively related to occupational "productivity" ($p=.001$), and occupational satisfaction ($p=.002$) because it is a component of general ego development ($p < .0000$). A positive relationship to anxiety emerged ($p=.00004$), suggesting that the issues of this developmental stage are indeed conflict-laden. A marginal positive relationship emerged with attitudes toward women ($p=.077$) but not with ordinal position ($p=.963$).

5. Anxiety was positively related to attitudes toward women ($p=.0097$), occupational "productivity" ($p=.033$), and ordinal position ($p=.004$), suggesting that occupational and attitudinal gains related to the women's movement have been accompanied by an expected disturbance in the status quo, leading to anxiety. This variable was also negatively related to occupational satisfaction ($p=.026$) and general ego development ($p < .0000$).

Liberal attitudes toward women were positively related to occupational "productivity" ($p=.014$), besides the expected positive relationship with anxiety and total ego development.

This could imply that liberal convictions are accompanied by the ego strength to withstand anxiety and productively pursue a career. There was the expected negative relationship to number of children ($p < .012$ in each case) and a marginal relationship ($p < .10$) was found with age, total living group in childhood and ego development for generativity.

7. The expected relationship among occupational satisfaction, anxiety, and ego development for generativity were significant with p-values $< .026$.

In addition, exploratory chi-squares investigated the relationship between religion and family size, ego development and sex role. This relationship between religion and family size was significant only for the total sample ($p=.003$), and p-values for each occupational group ranged from .111 to .885. Religion and ego development were significantly related only among Ph.D.s ($p=.012$) and p-values for the remaining groups ranged from .149 to .999. Finally, religion and sex role were significantly related only for the total sample ($p=.027$), and p-values for each occupational group ranged from .161 to .634. Generally, religion had no clear-cut relationship to the variable considered in these exploratory hypotheses.

Discussion

A central issue under investigation is related to Erikson's (1950) presentation of ego development processes in adulthood, as measured by Constantinople's (1969) Inventory of Psychosocial Development. Because Constantinople's sample and research questions were different from those in this study, present results may be regarded as tentative until the IPD is validated with diverse samples. Encouragingly though, the measure of ego development at the state of generativity (IPD7) is highly related to the overall measure of ego development (IPD), and this suggests that the measure is internally consistent.

The study's major finding was that the style of ego maturity associated with adulthood, "generativity", can be achieved by those who are not biologically "generative". Presuming the validity of the IPD, this result for Hypothesis 1 calls into question Erikson's emphasis on parenthood as a necessary condition for continued development, and offers counterevidence for the stereotype that childless individuals are immature and psychologically unhealthy.

Another important finding was that anxiety was strongly and negatively related to level of ego development. This supports Erikson's theory (1950) that the adequacy of

ego crisis resolution influences the development of such ego-enhancing attributes as self-esteem and resistance to anxiety or stereotypic conformity.

A related finding supports Block's (1973) theory that higher levels of ego development are associated with non-conventional sex roles. In this study, level of ego development progressed perfectly across sex role categories, with lowest ego development found among those scoring low on both femininity and masculinity, and highest ego development found among the androgynous group. Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1974) reported a similar progression of self-esteem scores across sex role categories, suggesting that those who combine masculinity and femininity not only feel better about themselves but also have an edge over other groups in terms of ego maturity.

Nonconformity and variant world views can take their toll in anxiety, however. Though liberal attitudes toward women were very significantly and positively related to ego development and occupational "productivity", this variable was also positively related to anxiety. Results also showed a negative relationship between such attitudes and number of children, supporting Lott's (1973) finding that females favoring women's liberation were less interested in engaging in childbearing and rearing than more traditional women.

A multiple regression with ten potential determinants of family size decisions, including ego development at the stage of generativity, accounted for only 3-5% of the variance. If ego development at this stage is not as closely related to indices of reproductive behavior as Erikson had theorized, then what are the significant correlates of generativity? An impressive 65% of variance was determined by the positive relationship with overall ego development, occupational "productivity", anxiety, and occupational satisfaction. Keeping in mind a caveat about the validity of the measure, this result suggests that Erikson's interpretation of generativity may be broadened to include and even be replaced by such synonyms as productivity and creativity in non-reproductive activities like career involvement.

Horner (1972) alluded to the importance of developing rewarding and acceptable alternatives to parenthood in her explanation that

> Inasmuch as having children is one of the major sources of self-esteem for women, it becomes necessary to have other options for enhancing self-esteem available to those who will respond to appeals to avoid overpopulation. Achievement in the outside world is such a possibility, but one which we have found is not at present a viable option because of the presence of psychological barriers like the motive to avoid success. (1972, p. 174)

The importance of examining low fertility and developing socially-acceptable alternatives to parenthood becomes even more crucial as evidence emerges to suggest that "unwanted parenthood" can be a causal factor in child abuse, marital unhappiness (Feldman, 1965) and the pathological family interactions noted in psychiatric populations (Pohlman, 1969).

In summary, Erikson's pro-natalist equation of parenthood and ego maturity has been seriously questioned, and this finding may be relevant in attitudinally based appeals to curb rapid population growth and the destructive correlates of "unwanted parenthood".

Summary

Subjects were 590 M.D.s, Ph.D.s, lawyers, and artists between ages 30 and 40 drawn from Who's Who of American Women, 1975-1976. Participants completed a mailed questionnaire including an anxiety scale (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory), a sex role questionnaire (Personal Attributes Questionnaire), a measure of ego development (Inventory of Psychosocial Development) and an Attitudes Toward Women Scale along with a demographic information sheet.

A major question studied relates to Erikson's discussion of ego development in adulthood. It was found that "generativity", the style of ego maturity associated with adulthood, can be achieved by those who are not biologically "generative" or procreative. This result calls into question Erikson's emphasis on parenthood as a necessary condition for continued development and offers counter-evidence for the stereotype that childless individuals are immature and psychologically unhealthy. This is important in light of Horner's (1972) argument that alternatives to parenthood as sources of achievement, self-esteem, and social acceptance must be found if we are to avoid over-population and the deleterious correlates of "unwanted parenthood" seen in child abuse, marital unhappiness, and pathological family interactions.

A number of other hypotheses were investigated and the findings may be summarized as follows:

1. There was no significant difference between parents and non-parents for ego development or sex role orientation.

2. Subjects undecided about family size had higher anxiety scores and lower occupational "productivity".

3. Anxiety and ego development were very significantly and negatively related.

4. Level of ego development progressed regularly across sex role categories with highest ego development found among psychologically androgynous subjects.

5. Religion was not generally related to family size, ego development or sex role.

6. Liberal attitudes toward women were significantly and positively related to occupational "productivity", anxiety and ego development, and negatively related to number of children.

7. Number of children was significantly related to attitudes toward women, but not to ego development at the state of generativity nor to maternal employment.

8. Total children wanted was negatively related to occupational "productivity" and positively related to total living group while growing up.

9. Ego development at the stage of generativity was positively related to overall ego development, occupational "productivity", anxiety, and occupational satisfaction.

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Footnotes

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2. The author is presently affiliated with Westside Community Mental Health Center, San Francisco.

Tables

Table 1

DISTRIBUTION OF SUBJECTS BY OCCUPATION, NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SIZE DECISIVENESS

1A — Have Children

Decision	M.D.s	Ph.D.s	J.D.s	Artists	
Decided	113	131	60	62	366
Undecided	34	32	22	17	105
Totals	147	163	82	79	471

1B — Have No Children
(% of Total with No Children)

Decision	M.D.s	Ph.D.s	J.D.s	Artists	
Decided	6 (5%)	39 (33%)	16 (13%)	11 (9%)	72
Undecided	0 (0%)	22 (19%)	15 (13%)	10 (8%)	47
Totals	6	61	31	21	119

1C — Totals with Children and with No Children

Decision	M.D.s	Ph.D.s	J.D.s	Artists	
Total Undecided	34	54	37	27	152
Total Decided	119	170	76	73	438
Grand Total	153	224	113	100	590

Table 2

CONTINGENCY TABLE FOR IPD SCORES BY PAQ CATEGORY FOR THE TOTAL SAMPLE

	IPD		
	High	Low	
1	23	109	132
2	65	95	160
3	78	51	129
4	134	35	169
Totals	300	290	590

Raw Chi-Square = 125.16698 (3 d.f.); $p = .000^{*}$

Table 3

COEFFICIENTS OF CORRELATION AND PROBABILITY LEVELS FOR TOTAL IPD SCORE BY TOTAL STAI2 SCORE
(2 Missing STAI2 Scores)

	Children (Decided)	No Children (Decided)	All Undecided	Totals
M.D.s	-.6144 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 113)	.0286 (p = .479) (N = 6)	-.7823 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 34)	-.6351 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 153)
Ph.D.s	-.7042 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 131)	-.5877 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 39)	-.5809 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 52)	-.6783 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 222)
J.D.s	-.4665 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 59)	-.6391 ($p = .004^*$) (N = 16)	-.6768 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 38)	-.5693 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 113)
Artists	-.6473 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 62)	-.4465 (p = .084) (N = 11)	-.5130 ($p = .004^*$) (N = 26)	-.6017 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 100)
			TOTAL	-.6344 ($p = .001^*$) (N = 588)